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ABSTRACT

A study of the advice given by professional writing consultants was undertaken because of the weaknesses found in many freshman composition texts. The findings suggest that these writing consultants have an edge over freshman composition instructors in their concern with their audience (sparing them excess verbiage and inflated prose), in their attention to the writer's voice, and in their attention to structure and organization. Texts prepared for professionals offer these lessons: the importance of using simple sentences; understanding the communication process of writer/message/audience not as a triangle but as three adjacent cogged wheels; emphasizing the use of parallelism, paragraphing, and transitions; and writing simply and directly by eliminating "wordflab." (A list of the sources surveyed is included.) (AEA)

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Professional Writing Programs: Lessons for Freshman Composition

I began this study of professional writing consultants because I worry that the writers of too many freshman composition texts are complacent. They have a captive and insecure audience (freshman aren't sure what good writing is; new TAs are not sure what a good writing text is). Text writers often seem to write more for the composition tradition than for flesh and blood teachers and students. Some teachers openly reject the use of writing textbooks, but many more tacitly acknowledge their weakness by ignoring them soon after the semester gets underway. Professional writing consultants, unlike freshman textbook writers, are paid only to the extent that their advice proves effective. They base their advice not so much on a tradition as on complaints about ineffective writing. Moreover, they have to write well themselves or their selves won't be taken seriously, their contracts will not be renewed, their books and articles won't sell.

One worry I had about this topic was that the needs of professional people are different from the needs of freshman composition students. As one consultant put it, the problem (in this case of judges) is not sentence fragments, or subject-verb agreement, but what he calls "word flab" and sentence-to-sentence incoherence. Can we in freshman composition afford to neglect sentence fragments and misplaced -s endings? No. But students who have learned to recognize their own "word flab" have often in my experience begun writing correct sentences in the process. The motivation to write effectively is infinitely stronger than the motivation to write correctly.

My research took me to several dead ends. In "Industry Week," September 15, 1975, I found a 1-page rehash of the most trivial principles of a bad

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freshman comp course. Give your prose, the writer says [he uses the word prose], order by using

--cause-and-effect

--known-to-unknown

--classic-persuasion [what does that mean--how does it order your prose?]

--order of importance: most to least, least to most [that covers all the bases]

"Industry Week" must have lost an ad for the September 15th issue and replaced it with this throwaway filler. The reputation of all writing teachers suffers when such impractical material appears.

I also found, especially in Robert Gunning's book, some extremely vague appeals to authority:

--"A top writing craftsman . . . once said" (p. 1-1)

--"The great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote . . ." (p. 2-1)

--"William Faulkner, one of the few Americans to win a Nobel Prize for literature, said . . ." (p. 2-2)

--"Consider this paragraph from the great British physicist, Sir William Louis Bragg" (p. 4-2)

However, my research did take me to several useful sources:

1) Calvin D. Clinton, Effective Revenue Writing, U.S. Govt Printing Office, 1962.

2) Marcel Smith, Judicious Writing, a workbook, copyrighted 1977, used by the American Academy for Judicial Education.

3) "Improving Your Writing," Gene Dallaire, Assistant Editor, Civil Engineering--ASCE, Jan-Apr, 1975. [I like the title of this one]

4) Robert Gunning, More Effective Writing in Business and Industry, Industrial Education Institute, Boston, 1962.

5) Sir Ernest Gowers, The Complete Plain Words, London, 1954. [for British civil servants]

6) Kenneth R. Hammond, Jeremiah M. Allen, Writing Clinical Reports, NY: Prentence-Hall, 1953.

7) Black and Veatch, Technical Writing Style, distributed in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

These writing consultants seem to me to have an edge over their freshman composition equivalents in 3 areas: the first is their relationship with their audience, the second is their attention to the human voice, and (perhaps surprisingly) the third is their attention to structure and organization.

The consultants seem, above all, to be concerned with audience. What will the boss learn from your report? How will the taxpayer respond to your request for an audit? How will the parents interpret your analysis of their child? Even in 1953, when college rhetoric was not yet interested in audience, the professionals were emphasizing it. Dallaire suggests that engineers write for their most demanding reader--a non-specialist. Hammond and Allen go farther. Their first principles of writing are: write from the reader's point of view; don't write before assessing your reader's knowledge of clinical psychology; think about your reader's willingness to deal with complexities. This may not at first seem to be cogent advice for freshmen, but freshmen have their own kinds of complexities--expressions which none but their friends will tolerate.

All the consultants use frequent analogies in an attempt to reach their own audiences. They compare writing to carpentry, to designing a machine, to weaving and even to making love: "Writing is like falling in love in that we know it happens but no one is quite sure how it happens." (Gene Olson, Sweet Agony, p. 3). Smith (the teacher of judges) says that using all co-ordinating

conjunctions is like playing golf with a 5 iron and a putter. You can do it, but you can't score very well, and your partners will regard you, at best, with amused tolerance. Dallaire calls unneeded words and phrases "sentence noise"; Smith calls unneeded words and phrases "wordflab" and exhorts his charges to go on diets. Clinton, the master analogist among those I read, compares achieving coherence without conjunctive adverbs (accordingly, consequently, however), to building a wall without mortar--wonderful, but rare. Failing to use active verbs, he says, is like driving a car with only half the spark plugs. In his most outrageous analogy, he compares the use of parallelism to the medieval use of battering rams. (I'll return to this battering ram.)

Using such analogies, the writing consultants attempt to break down the barrier of mystery which for so many Americans surrounds the process of writing. But the use of analogies won't reduce anxiety unless it is accompanied by specific advice. Where do these consultants concentrate that advice? On sparing your audience your excess words. Each of the consultants has his own favorite example of inflated prose: I'll read one:

> The spontaneous and energy-releasing interaction of atmospheric constituents with the molecular structure of the material causes to be produced a time-varying condition of unstable structural equilibrium distributed spatially over the cylindrical surface. [In other words, rust eats the hell out of pipes.] (April, p. 81)

The favorite caution is always something like, "Write to express, not to impress." This emphasis, I believe, attacks a chronic American problem. Those who shout about back to basics do not remember that Americans have never been good writers. Robert Gunning, perhaps rather simplistically, reminds us of our tradition:

> At the base of the complex writing habits of industry lies a dangerous delusion. It is scattered through all trades and professions. The confusion of complexity with wisdom and the mistaking of pomposity for dignity. Nearly every group has built up a foggy jargon to impress others. In the earlier days of our country many got away with this type of trickery. But that day, . . . we trust, has passed. (p. 4-10)

The Teaching Assistants at Maryland agree that various forms of this "wordflab," as Marcel Smith calls it, are the major problems in student writing. Of the 9 faults they found most troubling in student writing [digressiveness, lack of concrete detail, inflated diction, bad organization, field-related jargon, impersonality, use of passive voice, paragraph ineffectiveness, and inaccurate mechanics], 6 were forms of inflated prose. Yet these problems are not really attacked in a course which emphasizes rhetorical methods of development. In fact, they are exacerbated. One of the most dangerous exhortations you can make to a student is: "develop this." We can hardly go wrong, I think, if we make the major goal of our courses specificity. Even topic sentences can usually be made more specific with profit.

The second prominent concern of the professionals I consulted was a concern for the writer's voice. Ernest Gowers, writing for the British Inland Revenue Service, insisted on human warmth from his clients, and if I remember right, he got it. [The British take more money from each taxpayer, but they write personal letters to you when they take it. There's a lesson there.] Gunning, in his usual blunt style, combines his writing advice with business acumen when he suggests that we write for persons and not for filing cabinets.

To get their clients to achieve a recognizable voice, all the consultants I read encouraged their charges to "write as you talk." All of them, it is

true, began immediately to qualify this. Gunning says he doesn't mean to make that advice a "rally cry for a festival of self-expression" (p. 4-5). But none of the writers take an all-too-common freshman comp view that STANDARD WRITTEN ENGLISH is an alien dialect. Dallaire mediates the controversial issue as well as it can be mediated, I think, by suggesting to his readers: "Write as you talk, only tighten it up a bit" (April, p. 81). What I like about Dallaire's formulation is that it places the difference between written and spoken English in the revision stage, not in the first draft. Writing well begins with confidence. Confidence begins with writing your first draft as you talk. In all the works of these consultants there was nary a mention of free writing, but there was universal casualness about the rough draft. Dallaire combats writer's block with the advice: "Relax. Relax. Tell yourself what you're about to write is only a first draft" (April, p. 80).

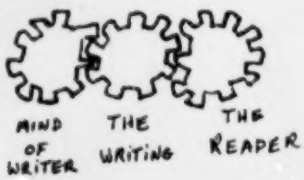
The third principle area of concern for these consultants is structure. Structure is what we in freshman English feel most confident about. We know what a paragraph is: a topic sentence followed by "development"; we know what an essay is: an introduction, 3 paragraphs, and a conclusion. Surprisingly, these writers have no such confidence. Dallaire facetiously makes organization sound simple: "In sum, writing is a process of selecting a finite number of ideas from an infinite reservoir (the universe); grouping these ideas into several homogeneous categories; arranging the major ideas into a logical and effective order; and finally tieing together all the paragraphs and sentences" (p. 63). Robert Gunning, though he has much to say about organization, admits that it is the hardest of all writing skills to teach. This is so because an effective structure depends on the matter to be conveyed. Gunning's first warning about organization is that an outsider can't prescribe it for a writer. He advises offices to throw out their 11-part forms and to

ask employees only for 1) their object in writing, 2) their conclusions and recommendations, and 3) their detailed reports. This business format allows the writer maximum flexibility. If we really believe, as we claim to in literary courses, that form and content are inseparable, why do we continue to insist that any old student content can fit into the rigid forms we choose to assign.

Clinton discusses organization with a simplicity and yet a comprehensiveness, which I at least have never seen in a freshman text. He divides all organizational skills into 3 categories: 1) segregation, 2) co-ordination, and 3) subordination. As we segregate, co-ordinate, and subordinate, we gradually form an outline. Our papers and our outlines are completed simultaneously, not in sequence. The Federal Government's Communication and Office Skills Center in Washington reports that they spend much of their time getting their charges to think clearly, to form thesis statements. Our freshman English colleagues would probably agree. And maybe the formation of a thesis statement is the most important structural device we teach freshmen. But after that we should listen to Clinton and not to the purveyors of pyramid-shaped conclusions, or I-beam shaped essays.

Finally, there are in these books, and I'd like to share them with you, some flat-out good explanations. They should enter the Freshman Composition oral tradition. The first deals with the problem of simplistic sentences, such as "The boy threw the ball." We usually try to combat such sentences with pleas for sentence variety. Dallaire suggests that such sentences, when found, should be regarded as core sentences and bombarded with questions. His idea is not original; Christensen advocates similar techniques in building cumulative sentences. But Dallaire's suggestion can be used without any background in grammar or any long-term commitment to Christensen.

The second in Clinton's graphic illustration of the communication process. He represents WRITER--MESSAGE--AUDIENCE not as a triangle (as is our current wont) but as 3 adjacent cogged wheels:



These cogged wheels are less abstract than the usual triangle, and to me they more clearly represent the process by which the writer can get through to the audience only through the message. The writer's wheel never touches the audience's wheel.

Clinton also places a just emphasis on parallelism, a skill treated negatively if at all in freshman texts. In Clinton's view, "few devices available to the writer of expository prose are so helpful, so frequently applicable, so strengthening to style as parallelism" (p. 117). He reinforces his message with a clever analogy which itself makes abundant use of parallel structure:

> In the good old days, when your neighbor locked up his castle in an inhospitable manner, you cut down a good, stout tree, trimmed the limbs, turned it into a battering ram, and went calling. But if you have ever swung a battering ram, you know that problems abound--where to catch hold of it, how to keep your toes out from under when your fellow workers decide without warning to knock off for the day and retire to the nearest pub; but most of all, how to get everybody swinging the thing in unison. (p. 117)

Your writing, Clinton suggests, will get through to more inhospitable (or

bored) readers, if you get your points swinging together in unison, in parallel structure. If you don't like the battering ram analogy, Clinton provides another: parallelism is like a comb drawn through tangled locks. (This one seems more closely to fit my experience with student papers.) Whichever analogy you prefer, I think it's worth impressing the usefulness of parallelism on students, and worth rewarding them every time they use it well.

Gunning has a short-and-to-the-point explanation of paragraphing which I have found sufficient for most students:

1) Paragraphs help a reader group ideas.

2) A reader likes short paragraphs

3) Occasionally you may use a 1-sentence paragraph for emphasis. But if you use several 1-sentence paragraphs, you have lost a valuable aid in grouping ideas.

Gunning's second point should be qualified; different readers expect paragraphs of differing length. But I think most freshman composition texts make paragraphing much more complex and much more self-conscious than it needs to be.

Marcel Smith teaches transitions more sensibly than I have seen them taught before. Too many texts simply give the students a list of conjunctive adverbs which the students promptly proceed to overuse. Smith points out that the primary form of transition should be repetition:

1) repeat a key term, or

2) replace a key term with a pronoun, or

3) repeat word orders in parallel patterns.

Conjunctive adverbs are a secondary form of transition to be used only when repetition is not sufficient. Smith draws an analogy with a superhighway. If a road is well built (i.e. a superhighway), then there is little need for road signs.

I also liked the way Smith grouped several common weaknesses into forms of "wordflab":

1) wasted repetition

2) distorted parallel

3) swollen connectives

4) asthmatic passive

5) sloppy modifier stacks

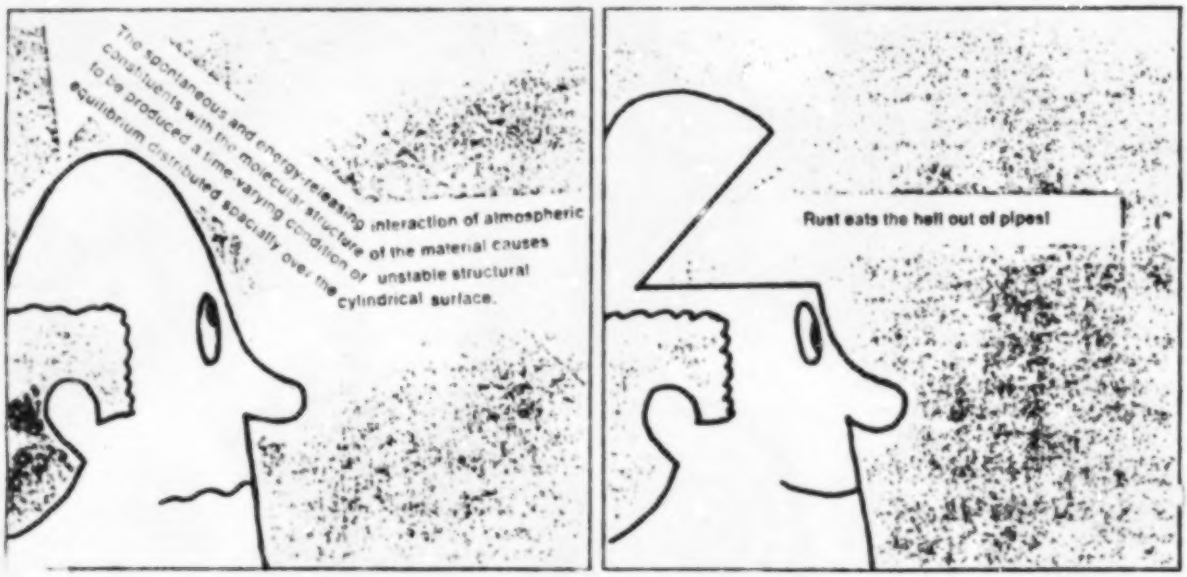
6) nouns made from verbs

7) polysyllabic, Latinate diction

8) overlong sentences

This makes a good checklist for students.

Finally, Dallaire makes use of a very effective diagram to teach writers to be simple and direct:


The spontaneous and energy-releasing interaction of atmospheric
Constituents with the molecular structure of the material causes
to be produced a time-varying condition of unstable structural
equilibrium distributed spacially over the cylindrical surface.
Rust eats the hell out of pipes!

(April, p. 81)

In this case, a picture is ten times better than a thousand words.

To sum up the lessons, then, of these texts for professionals:

1) Specificity should be the principle goal of a writing improvement program.

It is a valuable skill in all aspects of communication. We will never waste students' time in teaching them to be specific.

2) A teacher should think twice about demanding assignments in pre-cast form. Flexibility in form allows the writer to be truer to his subject matter.

3) Don't choose a text that ignores its audience (students). Completeness in a text is not as important as the attitude of the author; completeness is for the teachers, not for students.

4) Build up students' confidence in their own voices (tidied up a bit). If they are ever to get through to people, they'll need those voices.